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ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION
3/31/1979

Interview with David Burgess Burbank, nephew of Luther Burbank. Interviewers are not named but it sounds like John Hughes and an unknown female.

I. Now you are a nephew and your brother was a half brother – no, your father was a half brother of Luther Burbank.

Were you ever out at the Experimental Farm?

DBB Not in Sebastopol, but in Santa Rosa.

I. What can you remember of him? When you were a little boy you remember him?

I. He died in 1926. You would go see him before you were married then?

I. Can you remember what the gardens were like then?

DBB There was quite a bit. I remember he had a wheel barrow full of corn seed and he scooped up a bit and said "that should be worth about $10,000". It was corn seed.

I. Someone told me that he sold seed outside the house in Santa Rosa.

DBB Yes, he lived across from there. And then he had a carriage house there. He had a hot house and sold seed there.

I. Did he let you follow him around?

DBB I saw him turn summer salts on the lawn.

I. Was it a close family?

I. He had a sister, you know, She was a at one time.

I read an article in the Coronet that said he could send messages to his sister, physically.

I. Didn't you say that Burbank had a niece that lived in Susanville that would come and visit to Santa Rosa.

DBB Yeah, I never met her. Someone looked after her after she had a stroke.

I. When you were in Santa Rosa, were you aware that almost daily he would go to Sebastopol, that he would get in his car and drive to Sebastopol? He had a big open Willies.

DBB He always took the top off.

I. I talked to a man and women at Pitken Ranch on Vine Hill Rd. The woman is the daughter of Mrs. Pitken who has know to name plants. She said that there was a big birthday party for Luther in Petaluma, and they worked really hard to organize it, and Luther never showed up. He was just too busy.

DBB He told me one time that he had 1,000 experiments going on and he never had anything written down. He had it all in his head.

You know when Ford and Edison and Firestone got to see him in Santa Rosa? Yea, 1915. Ford sent him his first Ford tractor called a Fordson #1. Did he use it in Sebastopol? Well I saw it in Santa Rosa.

How many acres where there over there? At the Experimental Farm there were 14. And then on Bloomfield Rd., which is the Hurst Ranch, maybe 80 or 100 acres.

After he died his wife told me she made $25,000 on that one year. That was the one on Bloomfield Rd.

I. Someone told me that she always fertilized her plants because he wouldn't do it, so hers always looked better.

I. It is said that there was no water at the Experimental Farm, that all watering was done naturally – from the ground.

DBB That's near the cemetery. The Beachem's were buried there.

I. Bechem's, you know them?

DBB That's Burbank's sister. They had a little place in Healdsburg out near Fitch Mountain..

I. When you knew Mr. Burbank, can you remember any stories about him? Did he like kids? When the family got together, did he get together with the kids or did you just go about your business and play?

DBB I don't remember too much. I'll be 80 on my next birthday. In August.

I. How old is your brother, he's what 75?

DBB Two years younger, He lives in Petaluma.

I. Where was the first potato planted? Wasn't it in this area?

DBB Right here on this ranch.

It seems this next section is skipped a bit:

He decided to come here, hadn't seen him for quite a few years. He had a nursery business back east, he sold the rights to that business for a bag of potatoes. Then he had enough money to come out here. My father said he brought 15 Burbank potatoes in a suitcase. My dad was growing potatoes too. He took care of them.

I. Your father was out here before Luther, when did he arrive?

DBB My father bought this ranch in 1860.

I. Burbank bought the Experimental farm in 1890. Maybe he got here in 1870.

DBB When he left the ranch here he went to work for a nursery in Petaluma.

I. Did he actually live here on the ranch for awhile? Now when you say the ranch is that the particular property we are on right now?

DBB Yes, 200 acres

I. Was his potatoes better than the potatoes being grown here?

DBB Oh, yeah. Everybody wanted to have them. Everybody went to Burbank.

I. Was it because they were bigger, more per bush, tasted better?

DBB I don't know, Maybe something do with Uncle Sam and the British Queen.

I. I remember the term Bodega Red.

DBB After working in Petaluma he went up to Santa Rosa. Everybody there was planting prunes. So he got a lot of plants and budded them over. He had some 1500 order to do in a few months.

I remember when they grew hops in Santa Rosa, but that's all gone. It's all in grapes now.

I. Have you noticed a change in the weather? I know that the apple men say that they don't harvest apples as early as they used to. And the weather doesn't seem to be as warm as early.

DBB I don't know, it seems like the government should have a check on that.

I. Oh yes, we were trying to get Luther Burbank's mothers name. Do you remember that?

DBB I don't remember. She lived with Luther before she died.

DBB. Looking at a photo – It was a brick house, is this a brick house? No it's clapboard and painted. My grandfather had a brickyard. When he died he left the house to two boys. They divided the house in half and both lived in half of it.

I. Do you have any letters or correspondence between your dad and Luther Burbank? Or you families at all.

DBB I don't think so.

I. You were born here in this house.

DBB No the house is gone, but it was right here. When I was two my dad moved us to Petaluma. He was almost 60 when I was born. It was his second wife, the first one died. He met my mother coming across a canal. She was just a girl then, later he married her.

I. He must have been 65 when your brother was born then. They moved to Petaluma, but kept the house here.

DBB I went to college in Davis. It had 600 students then and only two girls.

I. So you really wanted to be a farmer, not just something that you fell into.

DBB We moved out here in 1920. My mother built this house. After she died we remodeled it.

I. Was your main crop potatoes?

DBB It was a sideline, mainly dairying. Grew hay to feed the cows.

I. We are going to try and get an interview with your brother next week. He's still very busy with the dairy. Mainly getting this information for the Apple Blossom Fair, but we want to get as much information we can and speak to as many people as we can. Eventually there may be

a museum up at the cottage in Sebastopol becomes some type of museum. Can you think of any other people that we could talk to? Did you know Robinson from Sebastopol.

DBB You know that doctor that's Chinese or Japanese?

I. Dr. Fugi? He lives near us. Fugi's used to have an apple orchard. Quite a few of the family built houses on the orchard property. It's close to the Hurst place.

END OF INTERVIEW